

“It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historic events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life.”¹
(Antonio Gramsci)

“Transformation”: Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi

Perhaps one or the other among you was astonished by the range of themes which we will be discussing under the overall term of “transformation” at our seminar. Even the selection of topics might seem arbitrary. Yet, in fact, this breadth and range do not only reflect the character of the present-day crisis but also – and this is what I would like to show in the following – the theoretical challenges of a contemporary notion of “hegemony”.

The crisis had its origin in the US real estate and finance markets, soon spilled over to the real economies and has now resulted in a crisis of national debts, with consequences which at present cannot be fathomed yet. In our opinion this indicates that we are not confronted with a cyclical crisis typical of the history of capitalism and also not with a crisis of capitalist regulation, but with one which comprises the accumulation regime of capitalism and beyond that also its political and international system; which means that we are confronted with a systemic crisis. If this is true we should take the time to critically examine the coordinates of our political action and if necessary to renew them.

Even for the ruling elites the situation is precarious. The attacks of the finance markets are overcharging the instruments of regulation available. Today nobody is able to seriously predict what will become of the Euro-zone. Despite all the lack of concepts which became obvious in the improvisations of the recent weeks, the elites are reacting with a class-political offensive the objective of which is to do away with those remains of the Fordist class compromise which have survived the neo-liberal counter-reforms. In the first place, the austerity programme is directed against the former working-class that has integrated into the “middle class”. Their living conditions are to be assimilated to the living conditions of those social classes unsettled by precariousness in capitalist societies.

Europe has arrived at a turning point. It might well be that we are standing at the beginning of a longer phase of social and political instability, trapped in a process within which the geo-political and geo-economical importance of Europe is on the decline. In hypothesis, “organic crises” (Gramsci) of that kind open the path to renewed possibilities for the dissemination of a theory of social change. However, since the crisis of the dominant hegemony is not outweighed by a counter-hegemony finding general consensus, considerable risks are imminent. “When these crises appear, the immediate situation will be delicate and dangerous since the field is free for all violent solutions, for the activity of obscure forces represented by men of violence or with charisma,”² he warned in the 13th book of the Quaderni which he wrote between 1932 and 1934.

According to our opinion, the greatest danger lies in underestimating the drama of the historical moment. Our debates today and tomorrow shall contribute to expanding the intellectual space in which we can deliberate and develop a new common political culture of renewal of the Left in Europe.

¹ Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnishefte / Prison Notebooks, vol. 7, Berlin 1996, p. 1563

² Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnishefte / Prison Notebooks, vol. 7, Berlin 1996, p. 1578

The first question arising concerns the character of the Left we want to be part of.

The 20th century has handed down to the Left in Europe, to speak more precisely, to the Left in continental Europe as its most important political legacy the organisational division of the labour movement into a moderate and a radical wing, or to phrase it more positively: the existence of mass parties with their own culture and institutions who independently and often in stark contrast to the current of the social-democratic majority represented the more radical currents of the labour movement. In spite of being inspired by the October Revolution their first historical lesson paradoxically consisted in accepting the fact that the Russian revolutionary model was fundamentally not transferable. As we know this model was characterised by a social reality in which, as Gramsci writes, “the state was everything, yet civil society was still primordial and gelatinous”. If applied in the West, where “there was a proper relation between the state and civil society”, a relation which therefore proved robust against the revolutionary ambitions, this could only lead to defeat.”³

The change of paradigm resulting from that, that is, the “change from the war of manoeuvre to the war of position”, called by Gramsci “the most important question of political theory that the post-war period has posed”,⁴ represented the first historical breach within Communist identity. In saying so, he does not reflect, as often is simplistically assumed, the ebbing away of the revolutionary post-war crisis.⁵ The time in which he wrote that down, between 1930 and 1932, implies something different, namely that Gramsci is implicitly referring to topical questions concerning the party: the turn introduced by Stalin in 1928 towards sectarian and authoritarian forms of politics and their negative effects on parties in the West, which – and allow me to say as much in anticipation – proved true in times of the economic crisis and manifested themselves in the defeat of the German labour movement.⁶

What fits in here is that Gramsci establishes a link between the theory about the war of position and hegemony on the one hand, the problems posed by the crisis on the other. “If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e., is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that **the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.**”⁷

We refer to Gramsci to talk about problems of today. Why is that so?

In his fundamental study of Benedetto Croce’s historical philosophy, Gramsci calls the most important methodological problem of historical and political research that the “philosophy of praxis”, that is Marxism, “does not only not exclude ethico-political history but that, indeed, in its most recent stage of development, it consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and to the ‘accrediting’ of the cultural fact, of cultural activity, of a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones.”⁸

³ Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften / Writings from Prison, vol. 4, Berlin 1992, p. 873

⁴ Ibid., p. 816

⁵ Cf. Wimmer, Ernst: Antonio Gramsci und die Revolution. Wien 1984, p. 15

⁶ Cf. Gerratana, Valentino: Einleitung zu / Introduction to: Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften, Bd. 1, Berlin, 1991. (Writings from Prison, vol. 1), p. 31

⁷ Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften / Writings from Prison, vol. 2, Berlin 1991, p. 354

⁸ Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften / Writings from Prison, vol. 6, Berlin 1991, p. 1239

Arguing with Gramsci makes a difference: It means two things: First, the notion of “hegemony” makes sense only with relation to “major social groups” who form a subject of their own. To use “hegemony” in the sense of Gramsci implies, just as in Marx, to interpret history as a history of class struggles; secondly, since – as Gramsci emphasises – “people become conscious of the conflict between content and form of the world of production in the sphere of ideologies”⁹, a major political group must “traverse the ambit of the economic group” to become a leading group, that is, it must assert itself in the area of ideology and culture.

This contains two things, namely on the one hand the idea of alliances, of, if you want, exterior and mechanic relations of social forces under the leadership of a “major group”, as Lenin also found them in both bourgeois revolutions in Russia. This alone represents a demanding project, since it presupposes that the “major group” can be convinced of compromises and the necessity of subordinating its selfish co-operate interests under a political universal interest.

It is even more complicated that within the theoretical arrangement of “structure and superstructure” the notion of “hegemony” concerns the inner of the “major group”, its subjectivity, namely its ability to intellectual and moral leadership in society.

Gramsci’s famous formula according to which the state in the integral sense is hegemony protected by the armour of coercion – please note: he did not say coercion mitigated or masked by hegemony, even if it might be universal – must be interpreted against this background.

Intellectual and moral leadership means neither an aesthetic completion of the unrefined struggle for power nor shall it be its surrogate. Still it is true, that Gramsci regards the concept of hegemony as the general principle of dominance of one class and power as one of its moments.

Thus the notion of “transformation”, which in everyday political language mostly refers to a process of restructuring of society over long periods of time and in midst tedious disputes, gains an additional aspect: subjectivity. Gramsci asks in the direction of “economist” tendencies of the labour movement, “Why do you exclude the transformation of the subordinate into a dominant group either because the problem is not considered at all or because it is posed in an inadequate and ineffective form (Social Democracy) or by claiming that it is possible to leap from class society directly into a society of perfect equality (theoretical syndicalism in the narrower sense of the word)?”¹⁰

Self-transformation of the oppressed class into a class enabled to dominance, that’s is at stake when we talk on transformation.

In the *German Ideology* Marx and Engels had written that “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.”¹¹

⁹ Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften / Writings from Prison, vol. 3, Berlin 1992, p. 500.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 499

¹¹ Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich: Die deutsche Ideologie / The German Ideology. – In: Marx / Engels: Werke / Works (MEW), vol. 3, Berlin 1969, p. 35

As already mentioned, Gramsci's concept of hegemony does not float freely in the political scientist's heaven, but is rooted in the material contradictions of society. This becomes particularly clear in the term of the 'historical bloc', which denotes an entity comprised of 'structure and superstructures', with "the complex and contradictory ensemble of superstructures being a reflex of the ensemble of social relations of production."¹²

While in general political language, by a 'social' or 'political bloc' we understand an alliance of different groups on the basis of converging interests, the term 'historical bloc' refers to something more in the nature of a principle, namely the ability in a certain epoch to mobilise social and political forces according to fundamental and long-term requirements of development. This describes the legitimacy and function proper of a political party. Political parties of historical importance can thus and in the first place be identified by means of the historical bloc the formation of which they are more or less consciously involved in.

"If a social group is formed which is one hundred per cent homogeneous on the level of ideology, this means that the premises exist one hundred per cent for this revolutionising: that is that the 'rational' is actively and actually real."¹³

The same idea of a dialectic relationship of "structure and superstructure" was developed by the Austrian Karl Polanyi in a pedagogic text which he wrote about the same time and which is addressed to left Christians: It is a misunderstanding, he writes, that the economic interests of a class are regarded as the last driving force of history. "Yet, rather, Marx's theory claims that the interests of society as a whole are the decisive factors in history. That these interests coincide with the best possible usage of the means of production; that therefore that class is meant to lead in society which is able to guarantee the best method of production; and that in case of change in the method of production a new class might be eligible to take over leadership ... (...). In other words: not class interests but the interests of society as a whole are the last agent in society's history."¹⁴

According to Gramsci, to determine this interest, there are two elements at our disposal, "1. that no society sets itself tasks for whose accomplishment the necessary and sufficient conditions do not either already exist or are not at least beginning to emerge and develop; 2. that no society breaks down and can be replaced until it has developed all the forms of life which are implicit in its internal relations."¹⁵ The programme of historical research outlined in this, is of decisive political importance.

The sentence, that "mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve and that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist", refers to the problem of the development of a collective will. Analysing critically the meaning of this sentence requires to investigate how these lasting collective wills are formed and for these wills to set themselves concrete long- and short-term goals, that is to arrive at a collective line of action. ... It is the problem that in modern times finds expression in terms of the party or the coalition of parties related to each other: how is the constitution of a party initiated, how does its organised power develop, the power that enables it to have an influence in society etc."¹⁶

¹² Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften / Writings from Prison, vol. 5, p. 1045

¹³ Gramsci, Antonio: Gefängnisschriften / Writings from Prison, vol. 5, p. 1045

¹⁴ Polanyi, Karl: Chronik der großen Transformation. Artikel und Aufsätze (Chronicle of the Great Transformation. Article and Essays (1920-2947), Marburg 2005, p. 270

¹⁵ Gramsci, vol. 3, *ibid.*, p. 492

¹⁶ Gramsci, vol. 5, *ibid.*, p. 1050f.

To Karl Polanyi we owe the term of the “great transformation”, which he used to describe the complex transition from feudal societies to capitalist market economy more than 300 years ago and which he correlated to the great economic and political crisis of the 1920s and 30s. “Fascism, like socialism, was rooted in a market society that refused to function. Hence it was worldwide, catholic in scope, universal in application; the issues transcended the economic sphere and begot a general transformation of a distinctively social kind. It radiated into almost every field of human activity whether political or economic, cultural, philosophic, artistic or religious.”¹⁷

Following Polanyi and also Antonio Gramsci, I would like to suggest an understanding of the current global crisis as a crisis of transition, a crisis of transformation.

This includes understanding the crisis which we live through in Europe as a crisis of the capitalist form of living. Defending our living standards and the social welfare states in the face of the offensive of the dominant class must be linked to the cultural and psychological assimilation of humans and of the working classes to a globally changed reality. This is a process described by Gramsci as the “transition from the merely economic to the ethico-political moment, [...] as a catharsis.”¹⁸

An initial condition must be mentioned here: Since 1970, not only has state socialism disappeared in Eastern Europe, but also the impact of the Left in capitalist Europe as shown by election results has declined from 15 to 7 percent. In this context there is also a remarkable qualitative change to be noted. While in the 1940s and 1950s big Communist Parties functioned as flagships of the European Left, their influence has decreased in two historical stages, in the 1970s and in the 1990s. This was counterbalanced by an increasing importance of new left parties of left-socialist, left-ecological or left-populist blueprints. To a great extent they reflect the political cultures of their respective countries, however, do not yet represent one characteristic and general model of a new formation of the Left. Therein also lies a theoretical problem.

So, what is today’s new Left if it accepts the principle of a war of position and hegemony as its premises? Is it a Social Democracy with a more radical language, what Bruno Kreisky predicted as the future of Euro-Communism? Gramsci raised the question arising from this theoretical problem with the categories he found. “Does there exist an absolute identity between war of position and passive revolution? (That is, of a revolution without a revolution, an assimilation of society from top down to a newly developing mode of production). Or at least does there exist, or can there be conceived, an entire historical period in which the two concepts must be considered identical ... One problem is the following: Are not in the struggle between passive revolution / war of position and popular initiative / war of manoeuvre both these components indispensable to precisely the same extent?”¹⁹, so that only from their flowing into one, a rational balance might be deducted for our strategy.

And one would like to add from a present-day view if it could be that difficulties, paradoxes and tensions resulting from the participation of left parties in governments result from exactly the lack of possibility or ability to bring about such balance?

¹⁷ Polanyi, Karl: „The Great Transformation“, Boston 2001, S. 248

¹⁸ Gramsci, vol. 6, *ibid.*, p. 1259

¹⁹ Gramsci, vol. 7, *ibid.*, p. 1727

To Gramsci, this question is important enough, so that “... one should see if it is not possible to draw from this some general principle of political science and art.”²⁰ And he hints at a solution, namely that in the frame of a productive dialectic between reformist and revolutionary socialism – remember, he is writing that in times when the Communist International was speaking of “Social Fascism” – “each member of the dialectical opposition must seek to be itself totally and throw into the struggle all the political and moral 'resources' it possesses, since only in that way it can achieve a genuine dialectical 'transcendence' of its opponent.”²¹

The imbalance that arose in the course of 19th century bourgeois revolutions between the moderate tendencies on the one, the people's initiatives on the other hand, consisted in the fact that “the thesis alone developed to the full its potential for struggle, up to the point where it absorbed even the so-called representatives of the antithesis: it is precisely in this that the passive revolution consists.”²²

This ‘being entirely its self’ refers to the formula outlined above: the ability to take part in the formation of a historical bloc is equal to the ability to contribute to the constitution of a progressive class which is equal to forming a political party in the historical sense.

Thus I arrive at my conclusion by first of all expressing my gratitude to you for your patience. I have tried to bring to mind some of Antonio Gramsci's categories for the reason to facilitate our debates by defining them more exactly. A second reason is that due to their origin in the context of the Great Crisis and the defeat of the European Left in the 1930s these categories can help us to understand the present situation more easily.

Third and most important, I am referring to Gramsci, because his categories outline the programme which we have to master in the process of a new foundation of the Left in Europe. Recommending theoretical discussions does not mean to work towards parties and movements turning into expert committees of social scientists.

Yet in a number of respects today's world requires a new interpretation. Let me mention a few aspects:

- the revolutionary changes in the world of labour, where according to Gramsci, “hegemony originates.”²³
- the disruption of sex and gender relations
- our arrival at ecological boundaries
- the crisis of hitherto existing forms of representation
- the inexorable upheaval of the global economic and political order

In the face of the new “great transformation”, which finds expression in today's “crisis of civilisation”, all political and cultural forces are facing the task of leading “to the birth of a new civilisation” through those who are taking it upon themselves to suffer in order to create the foundations of this civilisation: they ‘have to’ find the ‘original’ system of life ... to let ‘freedom’ grow, which is the ‘necessity’ today.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 1728

²² Ibid.

²³ Gramsci, vol. 1, *ibid.*, p. 132